

SETTING OUR MINDS ON CHRIST

Mark 8:27-38

Gathering Sunday, September 13, 2009

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Stubborn: unreformable, obstinate, wayward, cussed, obdurate, unrepentant, unregenerate, refractory, perverse, contrary, stubborn. None of those sounds very nice. And yet it seems to me that stubbornness can sometimes be a virtue.

Perhaps I think that because I come from a great, long line of stubborn people: mountain-dwellers who smoked corn-cob pipes and lived off the land and kept loaded shotguns by the front door; people with names like Pee Wee and Nubbin and Tennessee. My father says that my mother's side of the family is the most stubborn, while she stubbornly insists that it's his. My dad and I don't agree about almost anything, but on this subject we are in sync. My mother's family takes the cake for stubbornness. On her father's side, they are Italians from Trieste. No one can quite figure out how Italian Catholics ever made it to the mountains of Kentucky and became coal-mining Baptists, but they did. And like so many other immigrants, the immigration officials who met them on these golden shores decided they their last name, Giannini, had too many vowels and was too hard to pronounce. And so, with the swipe of pen they were given a brand new name: Jenia: JENIA. My ancestors

reluctantly accepted this new spelling but, true to form stubbornly refused to accept the new pronunciation. They spelled their last name as they had been instructed: JENIA. But they would forever pronounce it Giannini. Imagine the confusion on the first day of school when the teacher read the roll. I always cringe a little on All Saints Sunday when I read the names of my maternal grandparents, knowing that most of the house thinks I just mispronounced someone's dead relative's name. My family learned to live with this confusion because they were simply unwilling to relinquish their proud name and its history. They were stubborn for the sake of family pride; for the sake of their identity.

The Boston Globe reported on August 2 of this year that researchers are discovering that grit and determination (sometimes called stubbornness) are a better determinant of future success than intelligence. In a study conducted among fifth graders right here in New York, after taking an IQ test, one group was praised for their intelligence, another for their determination. The ones praised for being determined raised their scores by an average of 30 percent on a subsequent test, while the ones praised for intelligence dropped their scores by nearly 20 percent. Could it be that there is something to be gained from

being determined, from having some grit, from being stubborn for the sake of good?

Isn't that what our Puritan and Pilgrim ancestors were known for, at least in part? They came to this land with nothing more than some provisions and their stubborn determination to live and worship according to the dictates of conscience. And isn't that same determination the very thing that moved our ancestors at the Broadway Tabernacle to stand against the evils of slavery?

The people of this church were so determined, so stubborn in their convictions that even when a pro-slavery mob burned the church to the ground, they were undeterred.

Today's Gospel lesson is the well known confession of Peter; when he says of Jesus: "You are the Messiah." This conversation took place as Jesus and his disciples were traveling around Caesarea Philippi, an unusually beautiful place that is alive with a great diversity of religious history. Before Jesus' time, Caesarea Philippi had been central in the worship of the Canaanite god Baal. Later it became prominent in the lore of the Greek and Roman gods. Caesarea Philippi is purported to be the birthplace of the Greek god Pan, the flute-playing half-man/half goat. In addition to its religious significance, it

was a city of the Empire, a Roman outpost in the hinterland to remind regular folks that Rome was watching. Isn't it interesting that Jesus chose this place, so full of the gods; so full of political power and might, to initiate a conversation about his identity, and by extension, the identity of his followers.

As they walked along Jesus suddenly asked his disciples: "Who do people say that I am?" There was a good deal of debate about that and so the disciples reported to Jesus what they had heard: "Well, some people think you're John the Baptist, raised from the dead. And others think you're Elijah, reincarnated. And still others think you're like a prophet of old." Jesus interrupted their report rather abruptly and turned the spotlight on them: "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" And impetuous Peter, either in a moment of divine revelation or trying to be the Teacher's pet answered: "You are the Messiah." And then Jesus told them not to tell this to anyone.

What happened next was stranger still. Jesus told them the kind of Messiah he was to be. And let's say that it was not what they had been hoping for. Many faithful Jews of the time expected that the Messiah would be a conquering hero, the one who would free them from Roman oppression. Instead, Jesus predicted his own suffering and death and rising again. This

would not do! So Peter took Jesus aside to give him a talking to. "This will never happen to you, Jesus" Peter said. I imagine that there was a dead pause before Jesus slapped Peter's face with these words: "Get behind me Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Poor Peter, thinking he had finally got one right. Poor Peter, using the prevailing wisdom of the empire to predict a bright future. Poor Peter, as ignorant then about the ways of the Reign of God as most Christians are today. Like Peter, the church still looks for power and influence. Like Peter, the church still looks to conquer. The church has yet to fully understand that the power of Jesus is found in a cross. It's the kind of power that most folks see as weakness. It's the kind of power that we humans are not naturally drawn to. To really follow Christ takes a great deal of determination and stubbornness.

Jesus laid out before Peter two options, the same two that are laid out before us: human things or divine things. Which will we set our minds on? Will we choose empire; the trappings of success; the acclaim of others? Or will we stoop and pick up a cross?

Today we begin the 170th year of the ministry of this marvelous congregation. Before us lies a future that is bright with promise. The God who called our ancestors is still speaking, and speaking to us. And many of us have heard that voice. We have latched on to the dream of a revitalized congregation. We have seen the signs of a new springtime for Broadway Church. We have allowed ourselves to imagine what our future might look like. That is all really good stuff. But with our success comes the temptation for empire, marking success by the markers of empire – human things like reliance on numbers and money and status and influence. When you have been taken down a long way and start to rise up again, these temptations are very strong. But we are not called to empire. We're called to follow Jesus Christ wherever he goes. And we already know where that will be. Jesus ate with sinners. Jesus touched the unclean. Jesus broke the rules in order to be merciful. Jesus walked among the poor and oppressed. Jesus tore down the walls of status and culture and dead religion. Jesus poured out his life for "the least of these."

Broadway United Church of Christ, if we will measure our success not so much by the number of people in the pews but by the number of people whose lives were turned around and saved by love - then one day when we are

**all gone, those who come after us will look at what we did, and give thanks
and praise to God that we were so stubborn for all the right reasons.**

**May the same God who has brought us to this 170th year make it so. And let all
the people say: Amen!**